

Exploring teachers' practices of communicative testing in Iraqi EFL classrooms

Hind Farooq Ali AlHassan

Senior chief Researcher -General Directorate of Curricula-Ministry of Education

Abstract

The research aimed to explore teachers' practices of communicative testing in Iraqi EFL classrooms and their actual use of different communicative testing tasks in secondary school EFL classrooms. It followed the descriptive design of research and depended on a questionnaire for collecting data. The questionnaire includes (19) statements; distributing over two dimensions (communicative testing practices and the actual use of different communicative tasks). Results reveal that although teachers follow some communicative testing principles, they still rely on traditional testing practices, particularly in relation to speaking and performance-based assessment. The results also reveal that teachers moderately adopt some communicative testing procedures, especially in aligning assessment with lesson objectives, integrating skills, and considering both fluency and accuracy. It was indicated that teachers using a variety of communicative testing formats, but their use varied considerably across task types.

Keywords: communicative testing – teachers- Iraqi EFL classrooms

استكشاف ممارسات المعلمين للاختبار التواصلي في حبرات اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية لدى المتعلمين
في العراق
هند فاروق علي الحسن

ملخص

هدفت هذه الدراسة إلى استكشاف ممارسات المعلمين في مجال الاختبارات التواصلية في صفوف اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في العراق، واستخدامهم الفعلي لمهام الاختبارات التواصلية المختلفة في صفوف اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في المرحلة الثانوية. واعتمدت الدراسة على المنهج الوصفي، واستخدمت استبياناً لجمع البيانات. تضمن الاستبيان ١٩ عبارة موزعة على بُعدين: ممارسات الاختبارات التواصلية، والاستخدام الفعلي لمهام الاختبارات التواصلية المختلفة. أظهرت النتائج أن المعلمين، على الرغم من اتباعهم بعض مبادئ الاختبارات التواصلية، ما زالوا يعتمدون على ممارسات الاختبارات التقليدية، لا سيما فيما يتعلق بالتحدث والتقييم القائم على الأداء. كما أظهرت النتائج أن المعلمين يتبنون بعض إجراءات الاختبارات التواصلية بشكل معتدل، خاصة في مواءمة التقييم مع أهداف الدرس، ودمج المهارات، ومراعاة كل من الطلاقة والدقة. وأشارت النتائج إلى أن المعلمين يستخدمون مجموعة متنوعة من صيغ الاختبارات التواصلية، إلا أن استخدامهم لها يختلف اختلافاً كبيراً باختلاف أنواع المهام.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الاختبارات التواصلية - المعلمون - صفوف اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في العراق

Introduction

Tests are among the most important tools for measurement and evaluation of language learning. They are closely linked to the process of teaching and learning languages. Language tests reflect the nature of curricula and the expected outcomes that teachers develop in EFL classrooms. These tests are a positive or negative indicators to the effectiveness of the teaching and learning methods. "Assessment is

about several things at once ... It is about reporting on students' achievements and about teaching them better through expressing to them more clearly the goals of our curricula. It is about measuring student learning; it is about diagnosing misunderstandings in order to help students to learn more effectively. It concerns the quality of the teaching as well as the quality of the learning" (Ramsden, 1992).

Traditionally, tests , in the context of language learning, aim to evaluate language teaching for its own sake, which rely on rote memorization and recall (Younis, 2023). Baseer & Alvi, (2010) view that conventional testing tested competence rather than performance, knowledge the pragmatics of language rather than using it in real life situations. In this respect, a language test should be designed and directed to assess the expected outcomes in meaningful. Stemming from this view, the test should be designed in the context of language (Brown, 2003, p.10). Language testing should assess a range of linguistic and communicative competencies that require communication, interaction, and exchange to develop learners' expressive communicative.

Testing of communicative ability should be set out to show whether or not the candidate can perform a set of specified activities. More emphasis is needed to be placed in the communicative context and what the candidate can actually achieve through language (Baseer & Alvi, 2010). A communicative language test is an assessment instrument of learners' ability of using language in social contexts and communication situations. Communicative testing could be in both forms: receptive and productive (Morrow, 2018). Thus, communicative language tests are designed to assess language use appropriately in authentic communicative real-life contexts.

In the context of testing EFL in Iraqi schools, research results revealed a clear gap between the communicative goals of EFL instruction and the traditional methods used in classroom practice and assessment. Hassan and Ghafor (2014) concluded that EFL programs in EFL schools is not fully communicative, as it combines elements of grammar-translation, audio-lingual, and communicative approaches, which in turn, makes it difficult to implement communicative testing consistently. Additionally, Abdullah (2015) asserts that the dominance of grammar-focused examinations continues to hinder its implementation.

In the same vein, Kamal (2010) found that the examinations fail to assess all language skills and competencies, which contradict the principles of communicative language teaching. Furthermore, Ibrahim & Ibrahim (2017) add that the assessment system remains largely paper-based and students' success depends mainly on written scores, which encourages memorization rather than meaningful language use. Such type of exam reflects the classroom instruction, as teachers tend to emphasize grammar rather than communicative interaction, as well as the classroom activities often remain repetitive and lacking real conversation

(AlAkeeli, 2013, Alkhateeb, 2013). Moreover, as reported in UNESCO (2014), Iraqi teachers are often unfamiliar with CLT and receive insufficient training in communicative pedagogy.

Other research reveal that communicative teaching in Iraq cannot be effectively realized without corresponding reform in assessment practices, thereby underscoring the urgent need for communicative testing in Iraqi secondary schools. Mahmud and Bostanci (2022) found that the Baccalaureate English exam in Kurdistan does not meet students' communicative needs and recommended introducing more communicative assessment formats. Audil and Mustafa (2024) showed that although teachers acknowledge the benefits of communicative testing, its implementation is limited by several obstacles, especially a grammar-oriented examination system, insufficient training, and avoidance of speaking instruction.

To sum up, in light of the growing emphasis on communicative language teaching and the need to align assessment with the real purposes of language use, assessment system should be changed to achieve these purposes. In the Iraqi educational context, although many EFL programs aim to develop learners' communicative competence, classroom testing in many educational contexts still tends to emphasize traditional forms of assessment that focus mainly on grammar, vocabulary, and discrete-point knowledge. Therefore, this research is expected to contribute to the field by providing a clearer understanding of the extent to which communicative testing procedures and tasks are actually practiced in EFL classrooms. The present research may contribute to improving the quality of EFL assessment by shifting teachers and supervisors' attention from traditional, form-focused testing toward more communicative and performance-based forms of assessment.

Purpose

1. Exploring teachers' practices of using the communicative testing in their EFL classrooms
2. Exploring to what extent teachers in secondary schools use different communicative testing tasks in their EFL classrooms.

1.3. Research Scope

The present research followed the descriptive approach of research and delimited to explore to what extent teachers (n= 85) use and implement the communicative testing in their EFL classrooms

2. Review of literature:

The concept of Language testing

According to Roediger, et al. (2011, 01), testing has grown into the sense of accomplishment and anguish of the areas of education and psychology. It is a strong central concept that runs through the majority of the research and the practical work that is done in these professions.

Traditional language testing often focuses on discrete grammar and vocabulary items, neglecting the nuanced complexities of language use. But language testing can be a beneficial tool for giving material that is applicable to various issues in language teaching, it can give proof of the consequences of instruction and learning, and consequently, it can offer input regarding the efficacy of the teaching program, Bachman and Palmer (1996, p.457). In other words, language testing is a method that is utilized to assess the level of proficiency, achievement, and potential to utilize the language by learners. It is possible to carry out the process using a variety of approaches, and it gives educators the opportunity to demonstrate whether or not their teaching is successful more than just memorized forms; it's a tool for thinking, interacting, and creating meaning.

Testing is considered as a means of identifying the prior knowledge of learners and what they have acquired through instruction. It assesses learners' performance in order to determine their ability to complete specific tasks successfully. As an essential component of the teaching and learning process, testing provides teachers with valuable information about students' achievement, which can guide making decisions about subsequent instruction. At the same time, it helps learners recognize what they have mastered and what areas still require further learning or review (Ur, 1999).

Nature of EFL Communicative testing

Kiato (1996) argued that communicative assessment is a measure of how the learners are capable to use language in real life contexts. In measuring receptive skills, assertion is put on understanding the communicative intention of the interlocutor or the writer instead of picking out particular details. On the other hand, in measuring productive skills, assertion is put on suitability rather than on producing correct grammatical structures.

Weir (1990, p.15) adds that "A Communicative test implies the specification of performance task closely related to the learner's practical activities, that is, to the communicative contexts in which he would find himself". Similarly, "Communicative language tests are those which make an effort to test language in a way that reflects the way that language is used in real communication". Baker (2018) states that in assessing communicative language ability, performance in certain specific contexts is evaluated in a light of particular test constraints, for what they can tell us about a candidate's communicative capacity or language ability

Communicative assessment is committed to measuring not only the language knowledge of the learners but also to what extent learners are able to apply their knowledge to meaningful communicative contexts (performance) (Fulcher & Davidson, 2007). Carneiro et al. (2015), and Looney (2018) indicated that the competence development demands new assessment procedures, developing further

accurate measurement techniques, involving many people in the process of assessment, and applying more balance between what is required to be assessed and what can be assessed. Moreover, comprising assessment systematically with teaching is the potential of developing the educational process.

Yuzar (2020) argued that the assessment of communicative competence can be achieved by moving from centering only on linguistic and knowledge content to sociolinguistic and pragmatic language assessment. Moreover, he identified three implications to assess communicative competence: first, language assessment should be able to perform the language used in real-life situations. Second, communicative language assessment should integrate various communicative test instruments such as interactive role-play activity or picture response test. Third, integrating innovative tasks associated with technology such as social networks, blogging, wikis, etc.

Bachman (1991, p. 678) stated that communicative tests should include "information gap, task dependency, integration of task and content within a given discourse domain, and the measurement of a much broader range of language abilities". participants should integrate various sources of input. Participants should depend on the content of previous sections of the task. Communicative tests integrate skills within a given discourse domain.

Principles

According to Nguyen and Le (2013) communicative assessments should have the following principles: First, test creators ought to clearly illustrate what they expect learners to perform when they utilize the target language in a specific setting. In other words, the objectives of the test should be described clearly (Shimada, 1997). Second, the test should not only concentrate on topics but also on task types. Topics and tasks should be suitable for learners' age, level, and needs. Third, teachers should make sure that learners are well prepared and familiar with the form of the test. This is related to how the learners view the test to a point of strategic involvement on the part of preparing for, setting up, and following the test itself (Brown& Bailey, 2008).

Bailey (1998) stated the specific principles for communicative testing. The first is that The test designers should have a clear understanding of the expected outcomes or learning objectives that the test aims to assess. Well- defined and explicit objectives should be stated and identified before starting the process of designing language test. These objectives are stated to stemmed from the communicative abilities of a particular context. In this principle, Katsumasa (1997) emphasized that "test designers should carefully state what learners are expected to do with the target language in real-life situations before designing tasks or scoring procedures through identified rating scales".

Secondly, content of communicative test based on the topic as well as the tasks through which language is elicited. This content should be selected in light of learners' age, proficiency, interests, and communicative needs.

Thirdly, the tasks of communicative test should reflect the context of language use that learners have to encounter in their academic, social, or professional lives. In addition, these tests design should consider the learners' need to perform at their best and help them demonstrate their an advanced level of communicative competence. A supportive conditions should be created that improve language performance. Brown (2003) adds that "a communicative test should involve a degree of strategic preparation by both teachers and students, as teachers should provide appropriate preparation, review, and useful test-taking strategies"

A communicative test should produces positive washback, encouraging teachers to use communicative teaching methods and students to develop real communicative ability rather than relying on memorization or discrete-point grammar study. Hughes (2003) further emphasized that washback is part of the broader impact a test has on learners, teachers, educational systems, and society. Therefore, communicative tests should be deliberately designed to promote constructive educational change.

Characteristics

Brown (2003) identified five main characteristics for assessing communicative competence: Meaningful communication, authentic situation, unpredictable language input, creative language output, and integrated language skills.

- Meaningful communication: the test should be relied on meaningful communication that meets learners' personal needs.
- Authentic situation: the test should provide learners with opportunities to use the language receptively and productively in authentic situations.
- Unpredictable language input: the test should represent the natural way of communication.
- Creative language output: the output of the language is largely based on language input to prepare learner's reply.
- Integrated language skills: the test should reflect learners' use of language skills interactively.

To conclude, communicative competence assessment requires making efforts that reflects the way that language can be used in real life contexts. In the assessment of communicative competence, both proficiency and accuracy are combined.

Features of communicative testing

From a point of view of testing communicative competence, Davies (1988, p.4) considers context and purpose the only features relevant to testing of communicative language. According to Morrow (2018), the features that make language tasks communicative are as follows:

- Interaction-based: Language use is based on an interaction. A task for communicative test must have this spirit. Interactive tasks also involve both content and process, and receptive and productive skills.
- Authenticity: Authenticity can be described as the degree of congruence between a test task and the features of target language use. Without the use of authentic task, it is difficult to anticipate how the learner will perform in the real situation. Therefore, a communicative language test should have authentic tasks in the form of test items.
- Unpredictability: As interaction involves a sense of unpredictability, we do not know what we are going to say in what form in response to any stimuli. In this sense, the processing of unpredictable information in real time is a vital aspect of using language.
- Context: In language use, context plays an important role. The appropriateness of the language we use is judged in terms of the 16 context it is used. In a communicative testing task, therefore the notion of context should be incorporated.
- Purpose: Language is used to get something done. It is essential for a user to know the purpose of why someone is producing appropriate utterances to him. Therefore, this quality will have to be in communicative test.
- Performance: It refers to the genuine production of utterances or sentences of the learner of his own in the real situation in the given context. A test task to be included in a communicative test will have to require the testee to use his own language as a piece of evidence of his performance.
- Behavior-based: on the basis of behavioral outcomes, success in communication is judged. A task intended for communicative test therefore must offer the learner to achieve something out of his efforts in order to present the test task having communicative features

Communicative testing in Iraqi EFL context

The results of the previous research in the Iraqi EFL context reveal a consistent and interrelated pattern of challenges surrounding the implementation of communicative language teaching and the use of communicative language assessment in secondary schools. By reviewing the previous research, it could be concluded that there is a clear gap between the expected language learning objectives in Iraqi schools and the assessment practices. Hassan and Ghafor (2014) study revealed that the EFL educational curricula depends mainly on using the grammar-translation, the audio-lingual, and the communicative teaching methods. In the same vein, Abdullah (2015) reported that teachers and learners show positive attitudes towards adopting communicative testing and its value in improving EFL learning, although there are institutional and contextual constraints that prevent these positive attitudes from being translated into actual classroom practice. Other challenge is the traditional, grammar-oriented examination system.

In the same vein, Kamal (2010) found that the examinations fail to assess all language skills and competencies, which contradict the principles of communicative language teaching. Furthermore, Ibrahim & Ibrahim (2017) add that the assessment system remains largely paper-based and students' success depends mainly on written scores, which encourages memorization rather than meaningful language use. Such type of exam reflects the classroom instruction, as teachers tend to emphasize grammar rather than communicative interaction, as well as the classroom activities often remain repetitive and lacking real conversation, Alkhateeb, 2013). Moreover, as reported in UNESCO (2014), Iraqi teachers are often unfamiliar with CLT and receive insufficient training in communicative pedagogy.

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Methodology

Design

The research followed the descriptive approach of research using a questionnaire as a tool of collecting data. Participant of the study includes (85) EFL teachers at the secondary schools (n=10) in Iraq. They were selected randomly. They represented (31%) of the secondary school EFL teachers population. Their experience of teaching EFL ranged from (7 to 12) years.

Instrument

The researcher designed and used a questionnaire in order to investigate the practices and tasks of communicative testing that secondary school EFL teachers use in their classrooms. By reviewing previous literature and previous studies, the researcher formed a 3 Likert questionnaire of (19) statements distributed over two main dimensions as follows: practices and frequency of communicative testing that teachers use in their classrooms; it includes (11) statements; and types of communicative tasks which encompassed (8) statements. The questionnaire responses ranged from always used to never. The questionnaire in its initial form was validated by some specialists in TEFL. Recommendations of the jury members were done accurately. To make sure of the questionnaire reliability and consistence validity, a group of (20 EFL teachers was requested to answer the questionnaire.

Results of the pilot study revealed that reliability value using Cronbach Alpha was (0.73).

Data collection

A number of (85) written copies of the questionnaire were distributed to EFL teachers at (10 secondary schools) in Iraq, who voluntarily participated in the study. The participants' responses were collected and frequencies and percentages were calculated.

Results

Practices and frequencies of communicative testing

The first dimension aims to explore the communicative testing practices which EFL teachers use in secondary schools. Teachers' responses on dimension (1) were collected and counted quantitatively. Frequencies and percentages were calculated and analyzed.

No.	Statements	Percentage		
		always	Moderately	Never
1	I use test tasks that require students to communicate meaningfully in English language	1 %	9%	10
2	I design exams that regularly aim to assess students' ability to use English language in realistic or authentic situations	0 %	2%	18%
3	Speaking assessment is considered as a main part of my classroom testing.	18%	3%	79%
4	I use integrated-skill tasks (e.g., reading-writing, listening-speaking) in exams.	5%	1%	4%
5	My assessment tasks focus on performance rather than relying only on written tests.	9%	16%	75%
6	I include tasks that assess communicative competence rather than grammar knowledge.	36%	17%	47%
7	I involve assessment tasks that require negotiating meaning or exchanging information.	22%	18%	60%
8	I use standardized rubrics to score communicative tasks.	12%	73%	15%
9	I assess both fluency and accuracy in the EFL exams	71%	14%	15%
10	I provide feedback on students' communicative performance after testing.	52%	40%	8%
11	I align communicative test tasks with lesson objectives and classroom learning activities	68%	31%	1%

The first dimension aimed to explore the communicative testing practices used by EFL teachers in secondary schools. Teachers' responses were analyzed quantitatively through frequencies and percentages. In general, the findings reveal that although teachers follow some communicative testing principles, they still rely on traditional testing practices, particularly in relation to speaking and



performance-based assessment. The results also reveal that teachers moderately adopt some communicative testing procedures, especially in aligning assessment with lesson objectives, integrating skills, and considering both fluency and accuracy.

In specific, the results indicate that (49%) of teachers reported moderately agreement that they use tasks requiring meaningful communication. This result may be due to that teachers may occasionally include communicative elements in tests, but not as a dominant assessment approach.

(50%) of teachers reported that their exams always aim to assess authentic language use, which indicates a relatively positive orientation toward authenticity, which is a central principle of communicative testing. This result reveals that teachers may attempt to align language tests with communicative purposes, especially where textbooks objectives emphasize communicative outcomes.

(79%) of teachers reported that never use speaking part in their classroom testing, which indicates that speaking assessment is largely neglected in EFL testing in secondary school. This result may be due that speaking assessment procedures are difficult and time-consuming. Moreover, teachers may have limited class time.

(55%) of teachers reported their usual use of integrated-skill tasks in EFL exams, as teachers may naturally combine reading and writing in written exams, which is often easier than integrating listening and speaking.

(75%) of teachers shows that performance-based assessment is not usually used, indicating that written tests remain the dominant mode of assessment. This result may result from the fact that secondary school testing systems are traditionally paper-based and performance tasks require more time, preparation, classroom management, and scoring effort.

(47%) of teachers confirmed that traditional grammar-based assessment remains deeply used in many EFL contexts. Teachers reported their belief that grammatical accuracy is easier to test objectively and is more aligned with official exams. This result reflects a possible washback effect, where teachers emphasize discrete language forms over communicative competence.

Overall, the previous results reveal that EFL teachers in secondary schools demonstrate partial adoption and application of communicative testing principles, but their actual practices remain constrained by traditional assessment procedures, indicating that communicative testing is not yet fully institutionalized in secondary school EFL assessment. Thus, communicative testing is implemented only partially as speaking and performance-based assessment are still insufficiently represented in classroom testing.

Types of communicative tasks

The second dimension aimed to investigate the types of communicative assessment that teachers use in their EFL classrooms. Teachers' responses on dimension (2) were collected and counted quantitatively. frequencies and percentages were calculated and analyzed.

No.	Item	Percentage		
		always	Moderately	never
1	I use role-play tasks to assess students' communicative ability.	21 %	78 %	1%
2	EFL exams include pair-work or group-work oral tasks	44%	33%	23%
3	information-gap activities are used for EFL assessment	9%	69%	22%
4	I use interviews or question-answer interactions in testing.	9%	83%	8%
5	I use oral presentations as a communicative assessment task.	22%	16%	62%
6	I use problem-solving or decision-making tasks in assessment.	76%	13%	16%
7	I use project-based assignments to assess communicative performance.	42.7%	21.8%	35.5%
8	I use authentic tasks such as writing emails, giving directions, or participating in discussions.	73%	11%	21%

The findings presented in the previous table indicate that teachers using a variety of communicative testing formats, but their use varied considerably across task types. The results suggest that some communicative testing forms are used more frequently than others, while certain interactive oral task types appear to be used inconsistently. Although teachers reported their use of some testing formats, such as oral presentations, project-based assignments, authentic tasks, and problem-solving tasks, other communicative formats were used less consistently such as role-play, interviews, and information-gap tasks, which may indicate a tendency toward selecting communicative tasks that are more manageable in EFL exam. Thus, teachers may prefer communicative tasks that are more structured, easier to manage in large classes, more compatible with written or semi-formal assessment, and less demanding because its oral scoring demands. It could be revealed that although communicative testing is used, its implementation appears to be manageable and semi-authentic task types.

Conclusions

Based on the previous findings, it could be concluded that although secondary school EFL teachers appear to be aware of several principles and procedures of communicative testing, their actual classroom practices remain largely constrained by traditional written and form-focused testing. In addition, testing core

components of communicative competence, especially speaking and performance-based assessment, are still insufficiently represented in classroom testing.

Integrated skill tasks, assessing both fluency and accuracy, providing feedback, and aligning assessment tasks with lesson objectives were used actually in the assessment procedures, despite the absence of speaking assessment and performance-based assessment. Moreover EFL teachers relied on grammar-focused assessment rather than direct assessment of communicative competence indicating the teachers' need to further support through professional training, clearer assessment guidelines, and broader institutional reform.

It also could be concluded that EFL teachers employ a various range of communicative assessment types in their classrooms. An orientation toward meaningful language use in context is clearly reflected through using authentic tasks, project-based assignments, and problem-solving or decision-making activities. Other tasks, such as role-play, interviews, and information-gap activities, which are considered communicative testing oral task types, are neglected moderately. Thus, it could be concluded that teachers may be more inclined to adopt communicative assessment formats that are structured, manageable, and adaptable to classroom realities, especially in exam-oriented contexts.

Recommendations

Based on the previous results and conclusions, it is recommended to

1. Designing professional training sessions to enhance teachers' awareness of the concept of communicative testing, principles , procedures and its role in assessing learners' ability to use English meaningfully in authentic communicative situations.
2. providing teachers with practical guidelines about various types of communicative assessment tasks that can be used in EFL classrooms, such as role plays, interviews, oral presentations, information-gap tasks, problem-solving tasks, and integrated-skills tasks.
3. Guiding teachers to use clear scoring criteria, rubrics, and performance-based assessment procedures as main parts of communicative competence assessment.
4. Providing supervisors with more focused training workshops and professional development programs that address actual teacher needs in communicative assessment.
5. Providing supervisors with observation criteria for evaluating teachers' use of classroom assessment practices that reflect communicative principles.
6. Guiding supervisors to promote culture of assessment for learning, where testing is not merely a tool for grading but also a means of improving students' communicative performance.

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